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THREE CONCEPTIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

A STUDY IN THE EPISTLES OF JAMES, I PETER, AND I JOHN.

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THAT the writers of the New Testament letters placed emphasis upon Christian living is obvious. Their purpose in writing was always intensely practical. Even in those passages where a purely theoretical interest might appear to prompt their statements, the context reveals their ruling principle to be: Doctrine for life.

But what did they conceive the Christian life to be? Did they define it? Or if they did not, can their idea of it be discovered by a study of their writings?

There is apparently no mistaking James's view of the Christian life. He is always clear in his thought, and intense in his expression of it. He conceives the Christian life to be simply a life of *obedience to God's law*. Of course, he does not think of this divine law as simply ceremonial in character. With all his fidelity to the Jewish ritual, he is no Pharisee; he holds no such surface view of God's requirements as that. Nor is this divine law simply the moral law as it is set forth, for instance, in the decalogue, although of necessity it includes that. James was a Christian. He who calls himself the "slave" of Jesus Christ (Jas. 1:1) must have accepted his ideals; James's conception of the Christian life must have come from his interpretation of the meaning of his Master's life and teaching. Therefore the law in heartfelt obedience to which James finds the noblest ideal of Christian living was the moral law as Jesus deepened and enriched it. It is only necessary to call to mind the Sermon on the Mount, of which there are several clear reminiscences in this epistle, to appreciate fully what this means. The emphasis therein is not upon the letter of the law, but upon its spirit; to obey its mandates is not only to refrain from the sinful act forbidden, but also

and especially to master the evil passion of the soul from which the act proceeds. Everywhere in Jesus' teaching it is the same. On one occasion, it will be remembered, he summarized the law for an inquiring scribe in the two perfectly familiar statements: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:25-37). But Jesus did not stop there, for in the parable of the Good Samaritan he went on to give the scribe a startling illustration of what it really meant to love one's neighbor.

It is no wonder that with his Old Testament training and natural bent of piety thus luminously enforced, James should conceive of the gospel, Christ's message, as "the perfect law, the law of liberty," and of the Christian life as obedience thereto. How striking is the figure he uses (Jas. 1:23-25) to express his thought. This "perfect law" is as a mirror in whose pure reflection one can perceive his spiritual likeness and clearly mark his imperfections. Blessed shall he be who perseveres in steadfast contemplation of himself therein, and strives to present an ever nobler manhood as the days go by.

James does not in the famous passage about faith and works (2:14-26) dispute the vital necessity of faith for the Christian life. He presupposes a certain formal faith, even in the most unworthy of his readers, which he would quicken into life and power. Their daily living indicates that they have missed the full significance of their Christian calling and profession. The Father has brought them forth, James declares (1:18) by the word of truth (*i. e.*, the gospel), that they should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. But are they fulfilling this great purpose; are they worthily representing their Father in the world? James therefore dwells most strongly upon the second of the two great commands which, Jesus declared, summed up the Law and the Prophets.

He does not need to spend strength in enforcing the first. He may assume that his readers love the Lord their God and the Christ whom he has sent. Certainly they would declare unhesitatingly that they did. But what of the second—that which

James delights to call the "royal law"? Do they love their neighbor as themselves? If not—and it would appear that they do not—how can they be so sure that their love to God, their faith, the inner side of their religion, is all it should be? Christ joined the two great commandments; dare they separate them? With reproachful irony James pictures the outcome of such a separation (2:14-16): "What doth it profit, my brethren, if one say he hath faith (or, in other words, say he loves God), but have not works?" "The faith (*i. e.*, that kind of faith) cannot save him, can it? If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food and one of you (*i. e.*, a Christian) say unto them: Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful for the body, what doth it profit?" In another place he strongly implies that a wrong to a fellow-man gives the lie to one's claim to religion. He is speaking of a sin exceedingly common, in our day as in his, and says solemnly: "My brethren, hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ (*i. e.*, do not profess Christianity) and (at the same time) show respect of persons." He concludes his discussion thus (2:8, 9): "If ye fulfil the royal law, according to the Scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well; but if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors."

Instances might be multiplied, but enough have been given to show clearly what James conceived the Christian life to be. His definition of religion (1:27) is in suggestive harmony with all his argument: "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." To him the Christian life is a life "in the world, yet not of it," and a life of loving ministration. In other words, it is a life which finds its supreme realization in simple obedience to "the perfect law, the law of liberty," which his Master taught and exemplified.

In 1 Peter the conception of the Christian life appears to be less objective than in James. The emphasis of this epistle is upon "grace" rather than upon "law." "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," is its beginning, "who accord-

ing to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3 ff.); and throughout there is evident the same grateful joy in the glorious salvation God has revealed. Peter delights to dwell upon the blessed estate of the Christian, his exalted station as the elect of God, and the heavenly inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled, unfading, which, after his present pilgrimage is ended, he is destined to enjoy. What James is content to assume, in order that he may go on to enforce its practical present obligations in the daily living of the Christian, fills Peter with adoring love and wonder and constrains him to testify to it continually.

Yet, however much he is given to looking into the mysteries of redemption, and anticipating the "glories that shall follow," it is not a dreamy, unpractical view of the Christian life that Peter presents. For there is one thing, be it observed, that lifts his soul to greater heights of rapture than even the thought of God's wondrous grace in redemption, and that is the contemplation of the Redeemer himself. His is the one radiant figure that fills all earth and heaven to Peter. In the days long past he had been privileged to see "the King in his beauty." Beside the Lake of Galilee he had companied with him, had heard his words of love, and had marveled at his deeds of power. He thought he loved him then, but now—now that he has come to understand the full meaning of that sublime life, as it was revealed to him by Calvary, the empty tomb, Olivet, and the upper chamber whither the Spirit came—his love is past the telling, and his longing to be once more in the immediate presence of his divine Savior and Lord makes of his present life, even though it is lightened by precious memories and a living hope of joy to come, a barren pilgrimage. To him Christianity means Christ, and the Christian life means whole-hearted devotion to him.

This is, after all, in large measure an objective conception. The Christian life does not, to be sure, consist in obedience to law. To Peter the message of the gospel can never come in terms of law, even though it be "the perfect law, the law of liberty." Yet it does consist in service to something outside

one's self. Christ here takes the place which "law" filled with James. He is more than the object of men's faith—he is the Master of their lives. He is, indeed, the one "whom not having seen they love," but he is also the one who has redeemed them from their vain manner of life (1 Pet. 1:18 f.), with his precious blood, "who his own self carried up their sins in his body to the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24), that they "having died unto sin might live unto righteousness." To him they owe their hearts' allegiance. Can they measure the length or height or depth of his self-sacrifice in their behalf? Even so immeasurable is their obligation to yield him their supreme devotion.

It may serve to bring out in greater clearness the really objective character of this conception of the Christian life, if that of Paul, as found in his later epistles, be brought into comparison with it. Scholars lay much emphasis upon the surprisingly close similarities between 1 Peter and several of these epistles, sometimes drawing therefrom the conclusion that the former cannot be of Petrine authorship, but must have come from someone who stood much nearer doctrinally to the great Apostle to the Gentiles. While admitting freely such resemblances in many cases, one may decline to accept this conclusion from them since it is not by any means unlikely that Paul and Peter were very closely associated in their later years, and the less vigorous thinker may well have fallen occasionally into the familiar phraseology of the more vigorous.¹ But be that as it may, here certainly in this matter there is a marked difference. Paul is subjective, even mystical, in his conception. To him, not only is the Christian in Christ, but also Christ is in the Christian, and the life he lives is, in a sense, Christ's life.² Paul's whole experience as a Christian was such as would lead him naturally to think of Christ as the exalted Savior, the divine One, while Peter's experience, just as naturally, would lead him to dwell upon him as the Christ indeed, but especially as "that same Jesus" whom he had known and loved so well, who had left him an example, to

¹ See the article "1 Peter" by F. H. CHASE in HASTINGS'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

² See Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4; etc.

"follow his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21). In Paul's thought, to repeat, the Christian life is the life of the believer in Christ, nay more—Christ's very life in him; to Peter it is his life for Christ, his grateful service to him who has loved, forgiven, and redeemed him, who will soon come again and receive him unto himself.

The first epistle of John lends itself least to exact definition. To read 1 John is, so to speak, to stand within some vast cathedral, lofty its windows and rich in color, nave and choir echoing to strains of divinest music. The soul is stirred to worship; analysis is all but profanation. How unfathomable are the thoughts herein expressed! Though clothed in simplest language, they soar to the supernal mystery of the Godhead and sweep the illimitable vistas of eternity. As well hope to tell what makes the splendor of the sunset sky, the inspiration of the mountain peak, the grandeur of midocean, as to analyze the overwhelming impression of its divine truth and beauty left upon the soul by this sublime epistle.

And what is true of the epistle as a whole is also true of the conception of the Christian life disclosed therein. It is not readily contained within a single proposition. Before any attempt is made even to approximate a definition, it will be well to consider certain elements which evidently have a place in this conception.

As would be expected in the writer of the gospel of the incarnation (and to deny the common authorship of gospel and epistle is surely to go beyond the obligation of the facts), there is a noticeable emphasis here upon the three persons of the Godhead and especially upon the Father and the Son, in their relation to the believer. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also," says John to his fellow Christians, "that ye also may have fellowship with us; yea, and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Such a mode of thought is clearly an advance upon James and Peter. James does, indeed, attain to communion with the "Father of Lights" through heart-obedience to his will, and Peter has fellowship with his Savior through memories of the past and hopes for the future. But to John has come the

realization of the more comprehensive truth that "he that confesseth the Son hath the Father also" (1 John 2:23). He who sent is not to be separated from Him who came. Both abide in the soul of the true believer, and he abides in them, as the gracious Spirit testifies (1 John 3:24).

Again, there is the stress John lays upon the believer's actual present possession of eternal life: "These things I have written unto you," he says, in concluding his epistle, "that ye may know that ye have eternal life" (1 John 5:13); and this accords well with the statement of what eternal life is, found in the seventeenth chapter of his gospel: "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ" (1 John 17:3). It also follows naturally upon the idea of fellowship just noted. The Christian's fellowship with the Father and the Son is based upon his knowledge of them, and of necessity it cannot suffer any change in kind at death. It may, it doubtless will, be more complete, for the hindrance of the flesh will then be done away, and in the vision of Christ "as he is" will come the likeness to him not now possible; but still in essence fellowship with God must ever be the same. It is life eternal.

But this union and communion with the Father and the Son, this beginning on earth of a spirit-life which is to span eternity, must surely have outward, practical expression, if John's teaching is not to prove an exception to the New Testament rule of doctrine for life. Here comes in a third element in his conception of the Christian life. What is it, in final analysis, that makes God what he is? Is it not his character? And is not likeness in character the indispensable basis of any lasting fellowship? As the prophet of old so pertinently asked: "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" He who really has fellowship with God, who is truly his child must reproduce his character, if, in the nature of things, imperfectly, nevertheless unmistakably. "God is light" declares John, "and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not the truth" (1 John 1:5f.); and again, "God is love, and he that abideth in love abideth in God,

and God abideth in him" (1 John 4: 16). It is the same antithesis as is presented in the fourth gospel. On the one side God, who is light and love, or, truth and service, revealing himself supremely in Jesus Christ his Son; on the other, darkness and hate, or sin and selfishness, the spirit of the world alien from God, which "lieth in the evil one." There can never be any question, in John's thought, as to which cause enlists the Christian's powers. If he be truly what he claims to be, his works must surely "be made manifest, that they are wrought in God."

These are, if not all, at least some of the vital elements in John's conception of the Christian life. It remains to combine them, if we may venture to do so, in one statement: To John the Christian life is life in God, a close soul-fellowship with the Father and the Son, a true beginning, here and now, of the eternal life revealed in Christ, whose practical outworking must perforce be in light and love, since God is light and love. His is thus the subjective conception, an almost mystical union and communion with the Unseen. He does not fall below Peter in his love to Christ, but he, more than Peter, and like Paul, has attained to a present, glorious fellowship with him. He needs no memories of past companionship, no hopes of future reunion, to make full his joy. Christ is his soul's possession now. No more does he fall behind James in his insistence upon the moral obligations of the Christian. He lays as great an emphasis as James upon right conduct as the one conclusive proof of the genuineness of the spiritual experience; only to him such conduct is the inevitable outworking of the inner soul-fellowship with God, while to James it is conformity to a divine law of love outside one's self.

Is John's subjective conception of the Christian life the best, as it is certainly the most profound and comprehensive? Who shall say? One presentation of the truth fits best the needs of one, another of another. It is the unique distinction of the Scriptures that no man can read them with an open heart without finding therein a message from God peculiarly fitted to himself.